

# ANGEL

By Derek J. Canyon

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This guy's huge. He looms well over two meters tall and has to weigh at least 200 kilograms. And that's 200 kilograms of genetically engineered, rock-hard muscle augmented with cybernetic and vat-grown implants. His legs are as thick as my waist, his arms corded and dangerous. His bald black head, poking out of a bright orange shirt, is the only small thing about him. It's tiny on his huge frame, like a doll's head glued to the neck of a mannequin. His eyes are beady and black, squinting against the harsh glare of the fiery noon sun. His ears are lobeless but prominent, his mouth large and filled with dirty chipped teeth. He looks like some comical kid's cartoon villain.

Nobody laughs at Victor Thring.

I've heard a lot about him over the vine, but this is the first time I've seen him. He attacked a guard the afternoon he was brought in, and this is his first day out of the hole. His victim is still in the hospital where a couple dozen machines do their utmost to keep him alive.

Six prison guards escort Victor out of the hole, each holding a stun baton in shaking hands, fervently reassessing their career choice. Word is Thring killed seven security guards barehanded. The prosecutor only nailed him for five. He's in for life.

Like me.

I sit against a wall, looking out across the yard as the other cons mill around in the sweltering heat like eggs trying to find the coolest spot on the frying pan. A few of the more industrious try to get a basketball game going, but most are too smart to do anything but stand around and sweat. The heat-distorted figures of the sentries along the far walls, pacing back and forth in their internally cooled uniforms, look like wavering ghosts.

The giant walks stiffly out into the yard; his escorts leave like antelope bolting from a lion's den. Seeing him pass the other cons, everyone getting out of his way, I laugh. All these tough razors in for murder and mayhem back down from someone like Thring. Someone with the skill and fury to kill armed guards like so many gnats.

Someone like me.

Thring heads straight for me, like I'm some kind of magnet. He doesn't look aside, at the dozens of other cons glancing fearfully at him. He keeps his eyes on me. I keep my eyes on him.

I don't know why he comes at me, out of all the cons, but he obviously has a purpose. Maybe it's because I'm conspicuously alone, surrounded by empty space that nearly screams: "Mind your own business, you'll live longer." The other cons always keep a clear distance from me, abiding by that axiom. After all, I'm a borderline psycho, a corporate hit man who finally succumbed to all that chrome. Was it my fault those nine troopers got in the way? Was it my fault my idiot lawyer couldn't prevent my conviction? I was only responding to the situation in both cases, just as I was trained to do by the great and mighty Nendocorp. Lucky for me and Thring the United Globe justice system banned the death penalty worldwide.

Thring stops, his shadow envelops me. I look up at his silhouette, a tower of neohuman death: imposing, threatening, and blocking my sun.

I laugh.

"What you laughin' at?" His voice is so low it sounds like some seismic rumble burrowing up from the depths of the earth. It's an incredibly deep, gravelly voice, something that commands respect and obedience from a listener. It matches the body, but not the diminutive head.

I ignore him and watch the dust devils against the prison wall thrown up by the struggling breeze. The other cons watch, wait, hoping that Thring kills me and I kill Thring. After all, they

want to feel safe here in the Worldwide Dynamics Corporation Penal Arcology #108.

Thring bends down and snarls at me. I see his rotten teeth, sticking out like tombstones in his mouth. Apparently, the genetic engineers who designed him cut some corners on dental. He licks his lips.

"I'm talkin' to you, pissbag."

It's time to put this guy in his place. I'm the resident psycho and ice-cold killer in this bin, and I don't want anyone else getting their noses into my routine.

"You're blocking my sun, boy," I say softly.

Despite his technological ancestry, the racial slight has the desired effect. His face contorts in anger as he grabs my shirt and lifts me with ease to a standing position, the muscles on his arms rippling in barely controlled tension.

"I'm gonna kill you!" This guy's real original. His breath is stale and musty, like a puff of air escaping from a just-opened coffin.

I look around. The other cons watch closely, waiting to see what will happen. Well, I won't keep them in suspense. As the psycho, there is only one thing for me to do.

I jab my left thumb into his right eye and when he drops me, I knee him in the groin. It doesn't have as much effect as I'd hoped, and he swings at me immediately. I duck low, give him a glancing blow to the jaw, then a solid kick to the knee. He goes down to one leg. I jump behind him and deal out two swift rabbit punches.

Unfortunately, he still isn't out of the game. He kicks with his good leg and nearly catches me, but my cyberwires are better than his. I grab his left hand and pull it behind him. Breaking two of his fingers, I bring his arm hard up and around and drive my knee into his back.

"Listen up, Thring," I say evenly and clearly, to make sure the others hear. "My name's Ross Drake. I don't like being talked to. I don't like being looked at. I don't like being disturbed by maggots like you. When I let go of you I want you to ask around and find out what happened to the last corpse that blocked my sun."

I release him and walk off to the brown grass beneath the west wall. Everyone stares, slack-jawed. I sit again as before, legs crossed and arms in my lap, staring across the yard. The cons near my new location move away. The guards, having watched the whole exchange, choose not to intervene and go back to pacing. Thring is where I left him, standing and rubbing his arm. Strong as an ape and just as stupid; he could come in handy if I ever need any muscle.

But it looks like Marco Vance, the resident con kingpin, is making his move first. Two of his recruiters, gangly thugs lacking everything but a particularly cloying loathsomeness, break away from the other cons and saunter out to Thring, not stupid enough to get too close. They no doubt have Vance's permission to grant Thring's every desire. The gargantuan razor would make Vance's contraband and extortion operations within the prison about as secure as Archon Microware's main CPU.

Vance did his best to get me into his little cadre of criminals when I first hit this burg, but I don't play thug for a second-rate con. I think my answer ruffled his scales a bit too much, since he's tried twice to have me killed since then. How was I supposed to know he had a special place in his heart for his messenger? Anyway, after losing three envoys to the infirmary he decided to leave me alone.

My audio pick-ups catch every word as Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum try to entice Thring, extolling Vance's generosity to employees, and the unerring (with one exception) vengeance visited upon his enemies. Unfortunately, Dee makes a social blunder, blissfully ignorant of Thring's waxing anger, and steps within the goon's exceptional reach.

In a mere fraction of a second Tweedle Dee is lying in the dust, now blissfully ignorant of consciousness. Tweedle Dum moves back slowly several meters before turning and scurrying off to the protection of Vance.

Thring glares at the other cons watching him and they shuffle away. He finally seems to come to a decision and walks toward me once again. This time his stride is less belligerent; with a little work it could soon be submissive. When he nears, he does not block my sun. It seems that I have acquired a henchman.

"I got a message."

That gets my attention. Somebody outside sending me a message by way of a gigantic goon. Whatever he has to say I want to hear it. No doubt a promise of retribution from my old bosses at Nendo, but at least it will alleviate the monotony. I've been expecting some kind of action on their part since my first day, but they haven't made a move. Odd. Usually, they like to get rid of embarrassments such as myself as quickly as possible and in a very permanent manner.

"Sit." I pat the ground beside me and he lowers his massive frame against the wall. I notice the scars on the backs of his hands, matching my own, marking the removal of his blades.

Worry appears on the faces of the other cons. The clash of the titans has not transpired as they expected and hoped. It appears that the titans are joining forces. They move away, grumbling and fearful, correctly realizing it is only they who will suffer from such an alliance.

I turn to Thring. He smiles at me. It's a genuine, if ugly, smile and reminds me of a dog greeting his master. But Thring could easily be the kamikaze come to dispose of Nendo's dishonor. A lethal and blunt instrument lacking intelligence, but overloaded with muscle and obedience. Just the sort of operative to sacrifice on such a mission. Time to find out for sure.

"The message?" I prompt.

"We're breaking you out."

"Why?" And I thought I couldn't be surprised any more.

"My boss knows about you. About your job."

Well, well. Not a Nendo goon after all. There's a third player in town that knows about my last job. Even though my violent desertion from Nendo never splattered the news like my encounter with the Regional Atlanta Metroplex Police, it wouldn't take a genius to learn that the twelve million in illegal, corp-laundered, certified cash cards that disappeared with me was never recovered.

But most players aren't renowned for their benevolence. "How much?"

"Huh?"

"What percentage does he want?"

Thring grins in realization. "Oh, that. All of it. Everything."

Whoever is pulling Thring's strings is a confident one. Of course, I can promise anything I want and just kill them all later. I don't want to look easy, though.

"That's crazier than I am. I'll give him twenty percent."

"All."

"I don't like prison, Thring, but I doubt your help is worth twelve megs. I almost made it out on my last try. I could make it next time. He'll have to take four mill, no more."

"All."

"Hold on, Vic." I don't want this to go on forever, especially with someone as dull-witted as Thring. "What's the lowest your boss said to go? Because I'm not going any higher than fifty percent."

"You owe him. He wants all of it."

"What do you mean? Who is this guy? Why do I owe him?"

"He hired your lawyer."

So that was it. I always wondered how I managed to pocket the best defense attorney around, especially since Nendo was doing its utmost to discourage anyone from taking my case. He said it was just because he wanted the publicity of my case, which was easy enough to believe from a lawyer. So he was paid, not well enough to get me off, but still paid. That eases my conscience a bit.

"That means squat. That idiot couldn't keep me out of here."

"He kept the docs from cutting up your brain," Thring says with a surprising amount of wit, "and you repaid him by sending him to the hospital."

I want to answer but I'm astounded at Thring's use of a cohesive multi-syllabic sentence. In any case, this offer is ludicrous and I could just refuse and keep trying on my own. Three times I've tried to escape and each time some piddling little detail or happenstance screwed it for me. These walls are beginning to stifle me, getting worse than working for the corp, going where they tell you, doing what they tell you, killing who they tell you. I tried to escape one prison only to land in another. I'm not going to let that happen again.

But then again, I do owe Thring's boss something for the lawyer. I might as well go along with Thring and my unknown benefactor, at least until I have a gun in my hands.

"All right, Thring, it's a deal. I don't know how much longer I can take being locked up in this dump, and outside help makes it so much easier. So, when do I get to meet this angel that's gonna break me out?"

"He's no angel. He's Bill Ziebel."

\* \* \*

I turn from the guard's body and look at the ancient, fire engine red Oldsmobile convertible that Vic's accomplice has driven up beside the prison bus. With more chrome than the current Rambo incarnation, the car would be a teenager's dream machine.

"What the hell is this?" I demand, throwing the bloodied shovel into the ditch beside the bodies of the guards. "Haven't you guys ever heard of being nondescript? They'll see this from ten kilometers away!"

Victor bends down and removes the keycard from a guard's belt, which he promptly uses to disarm his collar. "Let's go," he grunts and pulls me around to the passenger door. I see the other cons in the wilderness reclamation work detail sprinting, despite the heat, for the cover of the trees. In their orange uniforms they look like so many wisps of flame darting through the long dead ruins of Albuquerque. Of course, they won't get far. The signals in their collars will have the heat on them inside an hour.

"Ease off!" I yell as Thring pushes me into the car and steps into the back seat.

This is new. Over the past two months Victor never laid a hand on me. I've come to control the prison in that short time, after disposing of Marco Vance. But now he manhandles me and won't follow my orders as usual. I don't like it. I don't like the convertible. I don't like Chester Gould.

Chester Gould. Now there's a shifty little backstabber if ever I saw one. First of all, he's not even 150 cents tall, probably less than 60 kilos, and has about as much muscle as Vic has brains. His sparse, scraggly hair is pulled back from his sloping forehead and over his ears to a short ponytail, held by a red rubber band. The skin on his face and hands is also pulled tight and

thin, like a worn shroud, the veins bulging like long green worms. His protruding eyes, black and hardly visible beneath heavy lids, are set close to a prominent, aquiline nose. His small mouth is bordered by extremely thin lips, which rarely ever close to hide his perfect teeth. A small, delicately maintained mustache completes this picture of deceitful sycophancy.

Whereas Victor reminds me of a looming troll blessed with a lack of warts, Chester looks like nothing more than a diseased undertaker.

All I know is his name, which is bad enough, and his manner, which nearly makes me retch. But the fact that he picks just about the most easily identifiable car in the world doesn't do much for my confidence in him. Nor his boss.

Chester puts the car in gear and we speed off, clouds of dust spraying up behind, blocking the view of the carnage Victor and I wrought.

"Why the hell didn't you bring a skycar?" I demand to know.

"We don't need a skycar to get where we're going."

"And where we going, Chester?" I make sure that the stress I put on pronouncing his name can be mistaken for nothing less than unbridled contempt.

"Well, Ross," he responds, exactly imitating my own voice, "we're going to find your money and then to see Mr. Ziebel."

I grab him by the throat and yank him over to my side of the car, squeezing. Nobody talks to me that way. His face quickly turns redder than the Olds as Victor lunges for the wheel and we swerve crazily to a stop.

"Listen, you sawed-off little runt!" I growl into his fiery face. "You call me Mr. Drake and take off this cuff off now or I'll rip your larynx out!"

Chester can't respond, of course, because my grip is quickly crushing his esophagus, but Victor yanks my hands away and throws me out of the car like a lifeless rag doll. By the time I get up, they are both standing, facing me, weapons in hand. Chester has recovered pretty quickly from my attack, and he smiles reproachfully.

"Mr. Ziebel wouldn't like you choking me, Ross." Chester Gould's voice is a model of honey-soaked false obsequiousness. His smile and fawning manner convey a picture of the cowardly, bootlicking toady. But the malignant lifelessness of his black eyes reveals his true nature: a ruthless killer who pulls triggers as much for perverse enjoyment as cold-blooded necessity. "But I do like that neck restraint. It completes that 'incarcerated' look those fine mandarin garments so subtly hint at. I suggest you refrain from future attacks."

Victor, looming beside him, grunts in agreement. That grunt has come to annoy me for the last couple of months, as we waited in prison for the escape. That grunt makes up about fifty percent of Vic's vocabulary.

I move forward.

"Not any closer, Ross. I'm fully aware of your dislike of confinement, but don't let it force you into a suicidal position."

Standing side by side, in front of the car, they go together like broken glass and donuts. Vic, in his dusty orange prison uniform, stands like some ebony war monument, right hand dwarfing the .44 Magnum it holds. Beside him, Chester dabs the sweat from his forehead with an orange handkerchief from the pocket of his pin-stripe suit. Unlike Vic, he's spotlessly clean. He's even straightened his tie.

I step closer.

Chester raises his tiny Derringer, which in his small effeminate hand looks like a heavy pistol. "You're not as crazy as that, Ross. In fact, you're not nearly as crazy as you'd have

everyone believe."

"You'll soon find out how crazy I am." Chester's Colt won't stop me, but Vic's Ruger certainly will, if I don't move fast enough.

"Ah, ah, ah. Come on, Ross, don't be stupid. Such aggressive behavior will only end up with you getting ventilated."

This guy is just as original as Victor. Did they get their vocabulary from two centuries ago?

"You can't shoot. Ziebel won't get his money."

"Which you'll take us to right now, if you please. I don't have to kill you to immobilize you, so be smart." He replaces his handkerchief into his chest pocket and pulls out something else. The collar transmitter.

"After all, what's twelve million between friends?" With a flick of his thumb my neck restraint stabs me with electricity. My pain inhibitors take up most of it, but I'm still forced to my knees, gasping.

Chester wouldn't dare hit the detonator switch, but he is just the type to shoot off my kneecaps to get his point across. I glare at Chester and Vic. The time will come when I'll have the better of these two, and then I'll send them straight to Hell.

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I empty the rest of the magazine into Victor and even then he still comes at me, stumbling lifelessly, grinding his teeth so hard they shatter. I push him down the shaft before he collapses, watch his bulk plummet into darkness. I wait ten seconds for the squelching thud of Victor's landing, but the only thing to rise out of the black pit is a muggy breeze. Hardly even that, more a waft of sluggish air, the scent of which nags at my mind as something just beyond recall.

I go back to Chester's body. It took only one bullet with him. He died pretty quick, only a slight red stain on his vest, a little blood trickling from his mouth and congealing in his moustache. His face hasn't changed much, except perhaps to look even more pale and skeletal. That annoying grin remains even in death.

The keycard and car keys are in his jacket. His red comb slips out as I take them. I leave it where it falls. That's all I need from Chester. After freeing myself of the collar, I lift him easily over my shoulder and send him after Victor.

"See ya, friend."

When I hid the money here, in this old mine, I left a gun too, never really expecting to need it. Of course, turning against Nendo does tend to make one a bit paranoid. I had assumed that I would use the gun, if I had to, against some of their hitters, and who knows? Maybe I did. Vic and Chester didn't fit the description of the average Nendo man, but perhaps the corp had sent them to put me off-guard. I thank Heaven I was so cautious.

I move toward the unearthed crate when I notice someone standing at the far edge of the lantern's light, motionless in the tunnel.

"Hello, Mr. Drake."

The pistol I hold is empty, the extra magazine in the crate. I haven't taken the time to replace it.

"I see you've taken a dislike to Victor and Chester. Too bad, they're a good team and I've come to rely on them. Perhaps too much. I must punish them for not bringing you all the way to meet me as planned."

I straighten. Vic and Chester are about as far past punishment as you can get.

"Who are you?" I ask, pointing the gun at him.

He moves forward, his fair features now evident. His face is clean-shaven and smooth; there's no sign of facial hair, no sign of wrinkles. His full hair is coal black, combed back with excessive care. His eyes are hidden behind dark shades. He wears a pinstripe, like Chester, although in a darker hue of blue, almost black; a red rose protrudes from the chest pocket. He holds a hat in his hands.

"Come now, put that away, we both know it's empty." He motions his hat at the gun. His voice is smooth and even.

I glance down at the crate. I can have the gun loaded in two seconds and shoot him six times in one more. He is six meters away. The only thing to consider is the possibility that he's armed.

On cue, he unbuttons his jacket and pulls a gun from his belt. "Step away from the crate, Mr. Drake," he orders.

I do, but also move away from the shaft. I do not drop my gun. Bill Ziebel moves forward, smiling. He's come for his money.

"You're quite an efficient killer, Mr. Drake." Ziebel moves toward me, and closer to the shaft. "Much better than Victor or Chester."

"Obviously. You should spend a bit more money and hire real talent."

"What they lack in skill, Mr. Drake, they make up for in loyalty. Victor and Chester never question orders, never complain. But now, of course, you are quite a bit more intelligent than both of them. Perhaps they can learn something from you."

"They're dead," I say softly.

"Don't you know me yet, Mr. Drake?"

This is getting weird. I look down at the open crate, at the stacks of shining cash cards inside, and the ammo clip lying on top. If I lunge for it, with my heightened reflexes, I might be able to take him. Or not.

He blocks the tunnel to the mine exit. Behind me the darkness hides a maze of tunnels, how deep and how many I don't know. Maybe there's another way out.

"There's only one way out, Mr. Drake, and that's with me."

Sorry, pal, but that isn't likely.

"There's the money. It's what you came for, isn't it? Take it, it's yours."

"I am here for something, Mr. Drake, but it's not in that crate."

This guy is too far gone for me. The only thing of value here is that crate's contents.

And that twelve million isn't worth my life. I can always make more, much more. I won't be able to return to my old haunt, the Regional Atlanta Metroplex. L.A.? New York? Why not? It'll be like a wolf let loose on the lambs, the phoenix returning from the ashes.

Ziebel's still watching me, a half-smirk cuts across his perfect features. The style of his clothes, the part in his hair, the manicure: he's no match for an assassin like me. His pistol isn't a large caliber, and I give myself seven-to-three odds that I can take him. He'll shoot eventually anyway, and a delay on my part brings me only closer to my death.

"But Mr. Drake, you're already dead."

This guy is certifiable.

"Denial doesn't become you, Mr. Drake. I'm amazed you haven't discovered it earlier." He puts the gun away and buttons his jacket, now standing wide open to any attack. "Actually, you've been dead for quite some time and I must admit that I have been somewhat remiss in



taking so long to collect you. My apologies."

Enough of this garbage. If he wants to play his little mind games that's fine with me, but I have games of my own. Much more lethal games.

I move, forcing every last gram of speed from my wires, crossing the distance between us in an instant. My fingers strike infallibly at his Adam's apple, delivering the fatal blow.

But he's not there. I stumble and nearly fall into the shaft. Catching myself, I spin low, scanning the cavern.

"Very well done, but you're cybernetic augmentations won't help you here." Ziebel stands next to the crate.

This time my speed surpasses even my own expectations and I don't bother with the niceties of a single attack. Three times I strike blows that would kill a neorhino. But each time I miss.

"That's quite enough, Mr. Drake." Ziebel is once again standing beside the shaft. He glances at his gold wristwatch. "I have other appointments. I cannot spend all afternoon watching you display your skills, considerable and impressive as they are."

I muster all my power and skill, and lunge. This time Ziebel does not disappear. This time he blocks each of my attacks with inhuman ease, and finally retaliates with a single open-palm strike to my sternum.

Impossibly, the blow sends me catapulting back against the wall. I sink to the dirt, limbs numb.

He removes his shades. Glowing eyes bore into me.

"It's over, Mr. Drake. You will be coming with me now." He waves his hat at me. I watch as the flesh on my hand pales and collapses, the meat muscles degrading, the metal muscles bulging through my sunken flesh. I feel my skin sagging over my subdermal armor, my tongue liquefying in my mouth. A great weight descends on my chest, a penetrating soreness spreads over my body.

This can't be happening. I'm Ross Drake. I can't be...dead. Not with twelve million and freedom so close.

Bill Ziebel comes up and puts his hand on my shoulder. "I'm afraid that you will never be free again." He shakes his head. Not in pity, but in pride.

I don't answer.

"Shall we go?" He lifts me up, and I stand swaying beside him.

I can't resist. My lifeless muscles respond only to Ziebel's will. We walk toward the shaft, the gleam from his eyes lighting the way, the fear in my chest burning like fire.